

Red Umbrellas

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Graduation *with distinction* for the degree of
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography in the Department of Art
In the Undergraduate Colleges of The Ohio State University

By

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March 2009

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2009

Abstract

Red Umbrellas is a collection of 25 color photographs that were captured with a Canon 30-D, digital camera and a Mamaya twin lens medium-format camera. The initial concept was formed in the spring of 2005 and work began in the fall of 2006. The photographs were taken in Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Rhode Island, New Mexico, Arizona, West Virginia, New York and Ohio. The photographs are Giclee prints, 18x27 inches, laminated and presented together at the Silver Image Gallery in Haskett Hall, located on the campus of The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. (Figure 1) These images were made to explore concepts of composition, space, color, object, environment and memory.

The project evolved and became complicated. I chose to revisit places that evoked strong memories. Eventually, I came to realize that I was constructing the photographs in my head before I arrived at my destinations. I was using my memory of a given place to pre-establish the composition. In some instances this presented unique challenges. I often arrived to discover that the area had changed and was not exactly as I remembered. I questioned the accuracy of my memory and also explored the effects a photograph has on memory. I sought to present all these elements in each photograph in a way that was engaging and understandable to the viewer.

Dedicated to Becca, my muse, thank you for braving 32-degree river water, hanging from ropes, lying in weeds, understanding my mental processes, endless lost time, for your advice and love. Without you my work could not be possible.

Acknowledgments

Thank you Ardine Nelson for your guidance, patience, support, technical instruction and the gentle reminders that yes, I actually do know the answers if I slow down and think about the problems.

Thank you Robert Derr for your instruction, encouragement and guidance.

Thank you Tony Mendoza for suggesting that I build this body of work.

Thank you to the other OSU faculty from whom I have had the privilege of receiving instruction: Professor Malcolm Cochran, Professor Richard Harned, Professor Scott Fisher and Professor Terry Barrett.

Thank you to the staff at OSU who went out of their way to ensure my success: Marthe Grohman, Amanda Gluibizzi and Sue Piro.

A very special thank you goes to Michael Heimlich for teaching me to laugh, directing me in life and supporting me through princess training.

Chelsea and Ben thank you for fending for yourselves, modeling and encouraging me to achieve my goals.

Thank you to Noha Gahny for your kindness, laughter and friendship.

Mary Fahy and Jessy Walker thanks for the lab talks and mental understanding.

To the gang: Luke Snailham, Cameron Sharp, Justin Luna, Alley Leperaz, Bob Hite, Meg Pursley, Hillary Jones, Lauren Bowers and Matt Failor thank you for friendship and endless critiques.

Jacqueline Reid, thank you for your support, love, advice and undying friendship.

My sister Susan, thank you for encouragement and carrying equipment.

I want to acknowledge my parents and family for their love and understanding.

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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Art (Photography)

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Chapter 1

Brief Introduction to Red Umbrellas

“I love the medium of photography, for with its unique realism it gives me the power to go beyond conventional ways of seeing and understanding and say, "This is real, too.”

Wynn Bullock

The concept began in the spring of 2005. I was working on an assignment for Tony Mendoza’s class and my models failed to show up. Having a need to meet the deadline for the assignment, I was forced to think of another idea on the spot. I had a few red umbrellas with me and I decided to place them into the landscape, along the banks of the Olentangy River, just outside of Columbus, Ohio. My dilemma was how to enhance the landscape with these man made objects and make them seem harmonious with the natural surroundings. The class critique provided positive feedback and Professor Mendoza suggested that I continue to build on this idea. It was over a year later before I followed his advice with most of my preliminary work consisting of sketches, jotted down ideas, scrutinizing maps and color testing. I started traveling with the umbrellas in the fall of 2006. I decided to see what I could do with them in the harsh New Mexico landscape. Since that time I have added to the number of umbrellas and have continued to photograph them in the many different regions of the United States that I have visited or resided. During the spring of 2007, I was awarded the undergraduate research scholarship, from the honors committee, of the College of the

Arts at The Ohio State University. This award helped to expand upon my travels in 2008 and allowed me to commit the entire summer to my research.

The work began as a study of composition, space and color using the natural landscape. Over the years the concept has evolved to include the element of personal memory. I became fascinated by the idea that a photograph can both alter memory and record memory. A photograph is a record of a moment in time, a moment in my life. On the wall, these images serve as a window into my memory for others to view.

I am often asked “but why do you use red umbrellas?” Foremost, I like them. Every autumn, before the start of school, my mother would take me shopping for a new umbrella. She was giving me a special treat to mark the new school year. The umbrella is a universal symbol of shelter from formidable weather or circumstances. The umbrella protects us from rain, wind and sun. Most people own umbrellas and are familiar with them. The use of the umbrellas dates back thousands of years and can be seen in ancient Egypt, Ancient Rome, Ancient Greece, Europe, China, the Middle East and the list goes on.¹ In my photographs this familiar icon draws attention to itself, pulling one’s interest into the image and as a result, every location seems touchable, reachable and attainable. Using the red umbrella in every photograph helps the viewer connect the entire body of work fluidly from one location to the next. Since the umbrella can change form by being open, closed and semi-closed it allows me creative flexibility. This versatile prop enables me to emphasize key features of composition

¹ Sangster, William, 1808-1888. Umbrellas and Their History - London, New York, Cassell, Petter, and Galpin [1871]

within the frame. Most importantly, the red umbrella represents my presence in a given space. The umbrella is a symbol of myself, saying I was here, I left my unique mark and this is what it looked like in this space at this moment in time.

Chapter 2

Composing in Nature

My original intent was to construct scenes using the umbrellas, a man made object, and seamlessly blend them into the natural environment. I wanted the umbrellas to look as if they belonged, as if they were a natural part of the scene. Of course, umbrellas are not a natural element and these are red, a color that boldly stands out against the natural greens and browns of nature. (Figure 2) However, the umbrellas have a versatility that allows me to work within the frame. They emphasize rather than distract. They can be opened, partially opened, folded, propped on end, submerged, and positioned for a multitude of effects. (Figure 3 and 4) The Red Umbrellas are used to highlight the unique character of the surroundings bringing attention to the unique character of each region. For example, in the photograph of the *Rock in Arizona*, (Figure 5) the umbrellas are folded, lined up end to end and are placed on the rock. The result is a red vein of umbrellas that slithers along the natural grooves in the stone, working with the elements that nature has created. The eye follows the red vein creating a sense of movement. The sliver of blue sky completes the image adding a vibrance of blue that competes with the brilliant reds, to guide the attention of the viewer. An excellent example of a semi-transparent effect is seen in the *Newport Sea Gate* image (Figure 6) where sun and shadow penetrate the fabric dramatically playing between brilliance and pattern. The pattern of the wrought iron shown through the umbrella allows the umbrella to become part of the seaside gate. The presence of the

umbrella highlights the intricate aspects of the gate. This image, in particular, has a luminosity aided from the angle of the late afternoon sun.

Color and environment play a huge factor in where and how I choose to build my scenes. In nature, red is used as a warning of danger, such as the red hourglass on the belly of the black widow spider. Red is also prevalent in animals to attract the attention of a mate or in flowers to lure humming birds or bees to pollinate. Instinctively, we notice the color red and I use red umbrellas as opposed any other color to grab the viewers attention, direct it and hold that attention inside the photograph. (Figure 7)

I also consider the entire frame the camera will record. I account for placement of subject, color, light, what the edges include or exclude and I plot for the best possible angle of view. Robert Motherwell stated: "Structures are found in the interaction of the body-mind and the external world; and the body-mind is active and aggressive in finding them. As Picasso says, there is no use looking at random: to find is the thing." ²

What we see with our own two eyes is totally different from what the camera "sees." We view the world in a three dimensional reality, enjoying the full richness of depth of space. A camera is attempting to capture what we see but the outcome is two-dimensional and while the lush colors and textures can be accurately reproduced, the depth is lost. Space becomes important not only in the set up but also in how that design translates within the viewing frame of the camera. Sometimes, I set up the entire scene only to realize it doesn't work within the frame the way I would like. I must then change the viewing angle or reposition the umbrellas, always seeking to create the perfect relationship.

² Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter. Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art-A source book of Artist' Writings. Ed. Peter H. Selz. New York: (Berkley and Los Angles, California: University Press, 1996), 26.

The goal is to do more than look at the space. The goal is to experience the surroundings through a gathering of information that takes into consideration the entire natural environment. At times, it becomes second nature to recognize all the factors in capturing a good image. Still, I try to stay alert and aware. Pictures capture moments and a moment can be lost if you don't anticipate its arrival. In a few seconds, I consider the available light, the placement of the subject with respect to the edges and middle of the frame. I consider foreground, background, negative space and, when working with mutable subjects, the relationships of space between the subjects. As Stiles and Selz said of the French mathematician, Henri Poincare, "Poincare pointed out that what was being discovered was not new THINGS but merely the new RELATIONSHIPS between things already existing."³ My work is intended to aid in the discovery of these relationships, to share them with others and to explore their relevance to the memory of that space.

Although there are limits when showing space and relationships through the camera lens, these limitations do not necessarily limit creativity. Richard Paul Lohse hits on this idea in excerpts from "Lines of Development" where he states: "Individual expression lies in the choice of methods, in the manipulation of provisions. Aesthetic value is no longer the result of equilibrium, but the result of provisions."⁴

³ Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter. Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art-A source book of Artist' Writings. Ed. Peter H. Selz. New York: (Berkley and Los Angles, California: University Press, 1996), 78.

⁴ Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter. Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art-A source book of Artist' Writings. Ed. Peter H. Selz. New York: (Berkley and Los Angles, California: University Press, 1996), 434.

In the beginning, this project involved constructing scenes in an outside space that was much larger than my subjects. (Figure 8 and 9) The space dictated the appropriate number, of umbrellas, and I trusted my instinct on what visually worked and what did not. As the project evolved, I started printing the early expansive landscape images and placing the photographic print back into the environment in order to photograph the photograph in a space much smaller than the original setting. In this way the process evolved from working in large landscape environments to a much smaller contained space. This allowed me to expand the creative process and also highlight details and features in the landscape, such as the rough texture on the bark of a tree. The photographs I reinsert are printed full frame to the size of 8x12 inches. If I move too far away from the photograph, the subject becomes too small to display the details. The final result, if properly done, is the combination of large-scale design and the intimate constraints of the 8x12. The image of *The Alley Gate*, taken in Savannah, Georgia, demonstrates this concept. (Figure 10) In this image, even the smallest stem, pebble or crack becomes significant. By pulling in close, I bring into focus small details that might otherwise be overlooked.

Working with a photograph in a photograph affords the flexibility to combine more than one characteristic of an area. It provides the freedom to move the image to another location. The New Mexico image of *Four on a Cliff* (Figure 11) was moved to a location twenty miles away. The cliff work was taken in Madrid, New Mexico but the photo in a photo was taken just outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico. This mobility lets me combine separate elements of the environment within each region. These combinations are composite snapshots similar to the layers of memory formed by the experiences during each visit.

I approached the work in two separate ways. One approach was placing the umbrellas into a large open space and the other was the intimate re-capture of the resulting photographs. The dilemma was how to group these two separate concepts together in one show hanging side by side. The ever constant, iconic image of the umbrella ties all of the images together. While choosing the hanging order, for the exhibition, I found that some images did not work next to others because of color, texture, or line. Ironically, while working in the gallery to hang the final show, I once again found myself challenged by concepts of space, color, environment and composition. These are the same issues that motivated me at the project's inception.

Chapter 3

The Snapshot and Memory

I was revisiting my past by taking a sentimental journey across the nation, or so I thought. I realized that my travels were taking me back to places I had previously visited. Most of these places had no significant change. They were as I remembered them from twenty years prior. Some, however, had indeed changed or my memory was flawed. I questioned whether I was actually remembering the place or possibly recalling a photograph that some one else had taken. I also considered it possible that the memory could have been of a post card from my post card collection. I began to consider the possibility that repetitive viewing of a photograph and not the experience of place formed my memory. This idea of false memory was both curious and disturbing to me.

“Many of us possess certain photographs that accrete believability over time. These may be photographs of family members or loved ones, autobiographical images, or other photographs that come to act as amulets or talismans, triggering certain emotion or states and warding off others. The relation of these photographs to belief is often not bound by their objective veracity. Rupert Jenkins (Assistant Director at San Francisco Camerawork) told me that when he was a child he picked up a photograph lying in the street and carried it around, telling everyone that this was a picture of his mother. After a while, he came to believe it was his mother. I had a similar experience in adolescence with a picture I found somewhere of my brother who had died before I was born. In some real way, that photograph did come to represent my brother.”⁵

⁵ Strauss, David Levi. Between the Eyes-Essays on Photography and Politics. Aperture Foundation, Inc., New York: (2003), 74.

On a more personal level, this idea of altered memory is strangely terrifying. My father has Alzheimer's disease. Having witnessed extensive memory loss in another, I am acutely aware of the potential for inaccuracy in my own recall. The photograph is twofold, it can alter recall, confuse the mind but it can also document a moment by freezing it within its frame. As my work progressed, it became increasingly important to me to document my memories and capture these places in the event my memory fails. In this sense, I am recording time. I was creating a personal journal to share with others. I was creating a new map of the places I had been. At the same time, I emphasized elements of those places that were dear to me. The *Aloe Vera* image (Figure 12) is a photograph within a photograph. The 8x12 is a previous visit to my life long, best friend, Jacqueline Reid's house. We were together in 2006 when I shot the original image along the Rio Grande River where it runs through Albuquerque, New Mexico. A year later, I returned to continue my research and in her backyard was a dead, giant, Aloe Vera plant. During my stay this plant became the source of many jokes at her expense and I wondered why she kept it. By the end of the trip I had a fondness for this dead plant that had spawned many fits of laughter. I decided to record this plant that represents both the harsh conditions of the desert and decay from neglect at the hands of a busy, modern woman. I placed the 8x12 into the spikes of the plant and the result is abstract but beautifully captivating. For me, this photograph holds memories of place, emotion and laughter. My colleagues have commented that they are perplexed with this image and have commented that it is "bewitching." While the photograph cannot evoke the same memories I associate with the image, they do find it appealing on an abstract level.

The idea of placing a photograph within a photograph to reinforce memory actually dates back to the early 1800s. It was a common practice to have a portrait taken holding a daguerreotype of a loved one. In this sense, I believe the photograph is supposed to evoke a sense of nostalgia. It is not so much to record the event, as it is to express the importance of the photograph in hand. “It is as if, in these pictures within pictures, the subjects want to draw our attention not only to the image they hold, but also to photography itself as a touchable entity, to the comforting solidity of its memorial function.”⁶ In this way, I am acknowledging the power of the photograph because when placed into the scene the image becomes the subject. My intention, though, is to place an emphasis on my memory. The viewer may not be able to understand the sentimental value the piece holds for me but they can experience what I have seen and how I remember seeing it. *The Coyote Fence* (Figure 13) also holds sentimental memories of our day trips to Madrid, New Mexico. Jacqueline told me the fence is to keep the coyotes out but she also mentioned that she has never seen a coyote in 15 years of living there. These fences are a common sight and very much a part of the southwest. Those who have been to the southwest will have a deeper appreciation of this image because of prevalence of the coyote fence. As a result the viewer will draw upon his or her own personal experiences, thus awakening a sense of nostalgia.

Some of the places photographed were from my childhood. Upon returning to these places I found that everything seemed much smaller. In the image of *Monticello*

⁶ Batchen, Geoffrey. Forget me not-Photography & Remembrance. (Princeton Architectural Press 2004) 14.

(Figure #14), I remember the house as being a huge mansion on a mountain and that it seemed like the road was ten miles long. I have viewed my post cards of Monticello but the sense of scale is absent. Revisiting the house, as an adult, it seemed much smaller and the view less grand. As I carried heavy camera equipment and a pack full of umbrellas, the long driveway, however, seemed just as long as I remembered.

Annette Kuhn touches on the importance of memory in her essay entitled *Remembrance*. “What I am saying is: memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in an intertext of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural context, historical moments. In all this, the image figures largely as a trace, a clue: necessary, but not sufficient, to the activity of meaning-making; always signaling somewhere else.”⁷ Photographs capture only a moment and all things change with time. I photographed Monticello with several different set ups of umbrellas. I purposely left one umbrella as the odd man out on the other side of the sidewalk. The lone umbrella is separated from the group of others. By doing this, I was trying to express the fact that I no longer felt that Virginia was my home. Even returning to visit my parents and my childhood home, I am now the odd man out.

⁷ Heron, Liz and Williams, Val. Illuminations- Women Writing on Photography from the 1850s to the Present. (Duke University Press, Durham, NC 1996). 472.

Chapter 4

Thoughts on Christo & Jean Claude, Antin and Josephson

My work is often compared to the work of several well-known artists. These comparisons are simultaneously disheartening and uplifting. As an emerging artist, it is disheartening because it is a way of saying the idea is not unique, not my own invention and uplifting because these artists are considered the canons of our time.

Red Umbrellas is sometimes compared to the blue and yellow umbrella projects by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, specifically, their work in Japan and the United States. (Figure 15) Other than the fact that I use umbrellas, however, I believe we have very little in common. Christo and Jeanne-Claude work on an enormous level. Their installations, in my opinion, do not work harmoniously with the landscape. Their installations invade the landscape and overwhelm the senses. Their umbrellas were constructed in much the same way a sculpture is made and they are massive. Each umbrella measured 6 meters (19 feet 8 inches) high and 8.66 meters (26 feet 5 inches) in diameter. They were bolted to a wooden support.⁸ Their work is the actual installation and the installation is only photographed to document its existence. My work is based on photography and that is my medium of choice. I am constructing the

⁸ Donovan, Molly. Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the Vogel Collection. Ed. Metro, Judy. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 2002.

setting for the camera not for the pleasure of long term, public exposure. My set ups are not meant to be viewed other than in a photographic form. I work on an intimate level and seek to blend my work with the environment, not have it dominate the environment.

My work is more similar to Eleanor Antin and her work with the 100 boots. (Figure 16) We share characteristics of travel, set up and the use of man-made objects. She traveled with her objects and positioned them into a scene and then photographed them, much like myself. The one differing aspect is that she puts them into positions and places people frequently visit and sets them into the scene as if they were people. She positioned them in the supermarket, the cemetery, the roller coaster, the park and the drive-in to name a few.⁹ My work is more about landscape and working with elements of nature. In the photograph, *The Bread Line* (Figure 17) my umbrellas are interacting with the statues but they are acting as objects, not as people. Clearly they are props in the photograph and the statues are the subjects. *The Newport Dock* (Figure 18) does not interact with nature per se but does interact with the wood, the boats and the surrounding environment in which the photograph was placed. My approach does have some similarities to Antin's work but I believe we have very different ideas about the significance of the objects and how we use them. (Figure 19) Ironically, the audience binds the likeness of our work in a simple act of acceptance. Much like the umbrellas, Antin's boots fool the viewer into accepting the scene as a normal event. Commenting on Antin's work, Howard N. Fox stated; "The boots have no character traits, no pathetic

⁹ Fox, Howard N. Eleanor Antin. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999. 48.

fallacy for the viewer to identify with, yet even the most disinclined, curmudgeonly viewer instantly and willingly goes along with the impossible scenario.”⁹

Another appropriate comparison might be to the early work of Ken Josephson where he uses the technique of capturing a photographic image within his photograph. He holds a photograph at arms length and then takes a photograph of the image, his arm and the background scene. (Figure 20) The idea that the photograph is the main point within the image is a concept that I also play upon. (Figures 21, 22, 23) Josephson's images offer a sense of scale by comparing the size of the hand to the photograph. Lee Friedlander stated; “I suspect it is for one's self-interest that one looks at one's surroundings and one's self.”¹⁰ Josephson is interjecting himself into the photograph by way of his photo in hand. He is expressing his thoughts by taking the second image. There is a certain humor about his work and the significance is in the concept. He is telling a story via snapshot. While I am trying to blend everything in the image together, he is saying hey this photograph works here. It is interesting to see his arm, his hand and the water line that does not match and yet the photograph is believable. While my approach is similar, I have a more subtle approach. I do not include myself and I try to blend the photograph into the scene as much as possible. In a few of my photographs I tried to conceal the photo in a photo. I purposely cut off an edge, of the image moving it out of frame. I try to fool the eye and on the first glance finding the photograph within the photograph is difficult. (Figures 24 and 25) Once the viewer finds the photograph within the image he or she gets a euphoric rush. They

¹⁰ Friedlander, Lee. Aperture Foundation. Photography Speaks, 150 Photographers on Their Art. 1st ed. China: Everbest Printing Co., 2004. 232.

begin to look for images within the image even on photographs that do not contain another photograph. I enjoy watching the reactions people have to my work and I like creating images that stimulate audience interaction.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The exhibition of *Red Umbrellas* represents a visual map of my adventures and discoveries over the past two years. It is the embodiment of my exploration in time, space, color and trace. During this process of discovery, I gained awareness of compositional relationships with subject and environment. I mastered understanding of scale on multiple levels and can identify workable space in any situation.

I also embraced the chance to work alone. The solitude enabled me to discover my limitations and strengths as a traveling photographer. Many of the photographs transfer the sense of calm I felt working alone. Two of the images were shot at the end of very long days of working on this project. Viewing these two images, I am conscious of the transference of my own isolation and peacefulness. (Figures 26 and 27)

Overall, the work is meant to be a whimsical take on what lies beyond the viewfinder. I suppose it is my subtle reminder to other artists, that it is not necessary to make a political, social or emotional statement in every project. These are several aesthetic images meant to bring focus on the landscape and this grouping is proof that we can leave a permanent record without disturbing or destroying the natural environment. These images are vibrant, breathtaking, lush, and calm. They are traces of my personal mark. They are my voice and they represent a time in which I chose to create something. This stain of ink on paper, while playful, is a bold statement of creative, self-expression.

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Silver Image Gallery, Haskett Hall 2009



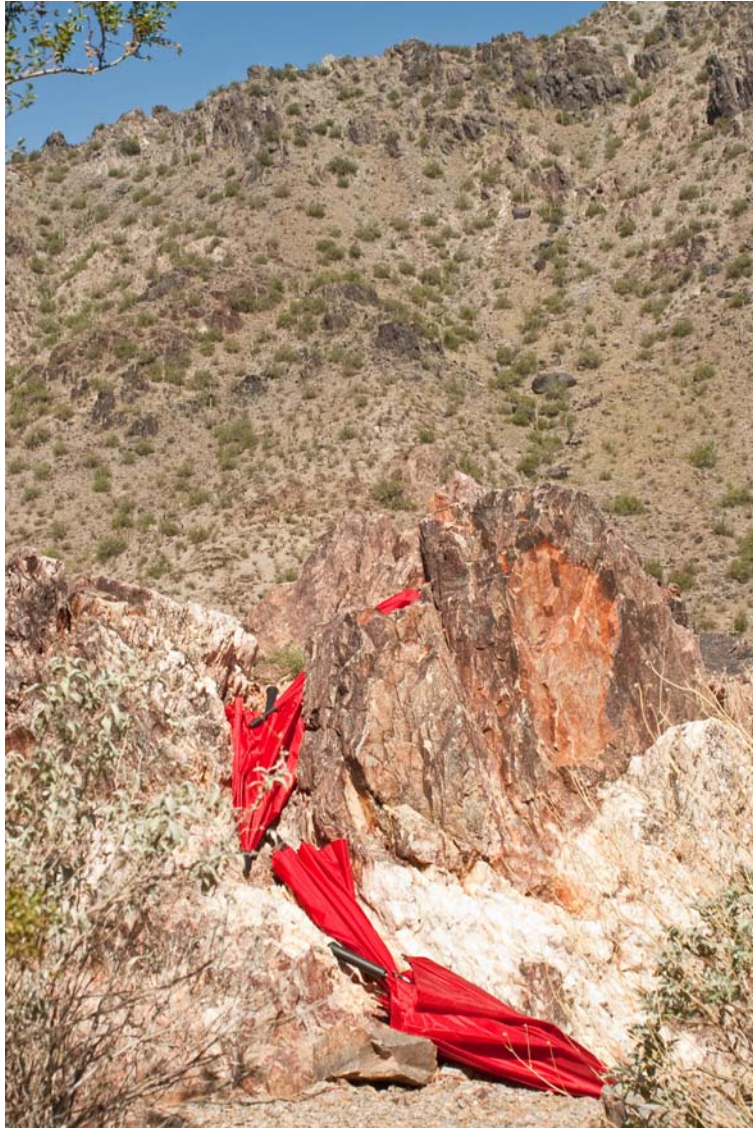
The Pump House, Saratoga Springs, New York, 2008



Fence, Madrid, New Mexico, 2008



Washed Up, Newport, Rhode Island, 2008



Arizona Rock, Phoenix, Arizona, 2008



Newport Sea Gate, Newport, Rhode Island, 2008



Ohio Trail, Delaware, Ohio 2008



New Mexico Flowers, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2008



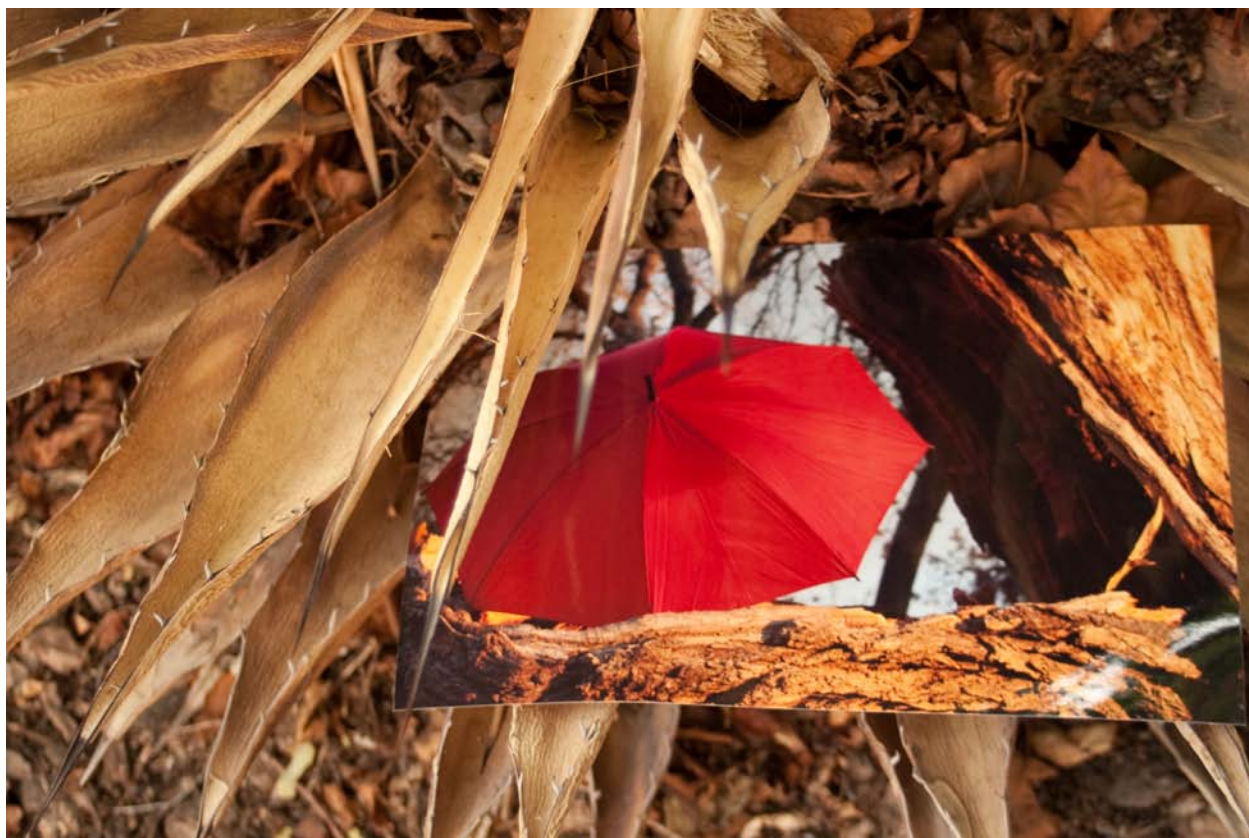
Ohio Highbanks, Delaware, Ohio, 2008



The Alley Gate, Savannah, Georgia, 2008



Four on a Cliff, Madrid, New Mexico, 2008



Aloe Vera, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2008



Coyote Fence, Madrid, New Mexico, 2008



Monticello , Charlottesville, Virginia, 2008

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Example A: The Umbrellas, Japan-USA., 1984-91, Christo and Jeanne-Claude

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Example B: Eleanor Antin, 100 Boots, 1971-1973



The Bread Line, Washington, D.C., 2008



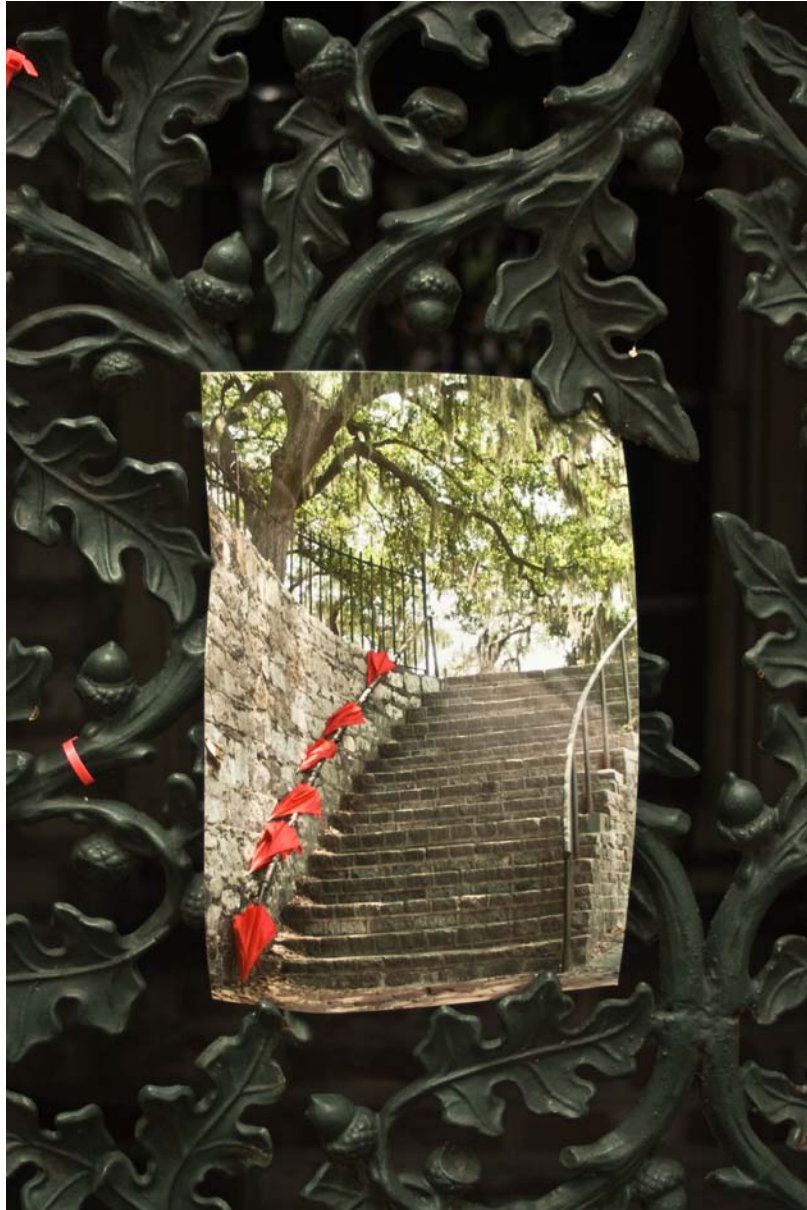
Newport Dock, Newport, Rhode Island, 2008



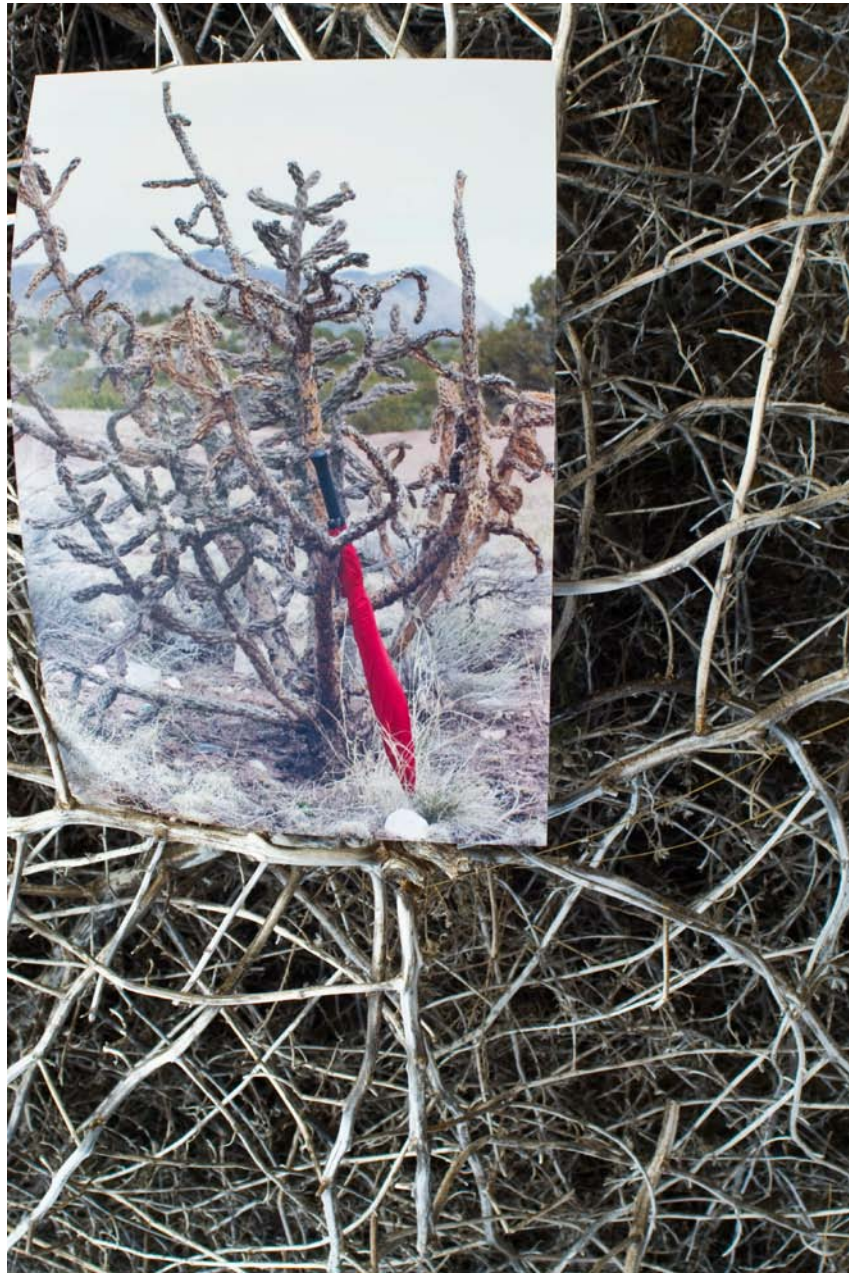
The Savannah Steps, Savannah, Georgia, 2009

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Example C: New York State, 1970, from Ken Josephson portfolio, 1973/1975



The Iron Gate, Savannah, Georgia, 2008



Tumble Weed, Phoenix, Arizona, 2008



Saguaro Cactus, Phoenix, Arizona, 2008



The Mountains, Phoenix, Arizona, 2008



Arizona Cactus, Phoenix, Arizona, 2008



Newport Harbor, Newport, Rhode Island, 2008



Washington, D.C., 2008